

BUILDING COMMITMENT: THE US MILITARY PRESENCE IN EUROPE DURING THE COLD WAR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article is to present and discuss theoretical and conceptual understandings that allow, through historical reconstruction, to understand the rationale of the permanent military presence of the United States (USA) in Western Europe during the Cold War, in the broad context of the Union's containment and deterrence of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This understanding is not only relevant from the historical and theoretical points of view, but also to make sense of contemporary international politics and the ordering that produces it, given the continued presence – although reduced – of conventional US forces in the region even with the disappearance of its original rationale. In methodological terms, the argument is based on secondary sources, when it comes to the historical reconstruction of the period, and based on deductive hypotheses, when it comes to the theoretical framework that guide the analysis, which is common to strategic thinking in the nuclear field.

Keywords: Cold War. Thermonuclear Revolution. Conventional Balance. Strength Stance. Bipolarity.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we propose an analysis of the international order of the Cold War, or the period between the end of the Second World War and the political and military withdrawal of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the early 1990s. We focused on the international policy of the United States (USA) security and defense, apprehended by its most concrete and analytically discernible element: the permanent military presence of conventional American forces in Europe. The origin of this historic US commitment – the first instance in which US military forces have been deployed permanently in other regions in absence of open war – lies in two mutually reinforcing elements: the power configuration in Eurasia after World War II and the thermonuclear revolution.

The purpose of the analysis is to identify the rationale for the permanent presence of conventional US forces in allied territories in the context of USSR containment and reciprocal nuclear deterrence. In the final remarks, we argue that the understanding constructed throughout the text elucidates some important features of contemporary international politics, in the current unipolarity², in view of the maintenance of the conventional force structure of the USA in Europe, even with the disappearance of its original *raison d'être*.

THE ORIGINS OF CONTENTION AND THE FORMATION OF TWO GREAT ALLIANCES

The reality that was imposed on the USA immediately after the end of the 1939-1945 war indicated the beginning of an unprecedented period in its international history. The main states of Western Europe and Asia were facing serious social and economic problems and under the weight of a powerful and increasingly hostile USSR, which was already shading the eastern part of the European continent. Western European countries felt the severity of the new configuration more dramatically and promptly began negotiating a joint venture that would strengthen them in the face of

² The traditional and more consistent argument that characterizes the post-Cold War international order as unipolar is by Wohlforth (1999). More contemporaneously, the argument was revised and slightly modified to accommodate China's growth, in Brooks and Wohlforth (2016). Despite granting intermediate status to China – between pole and non-pole – the authors support the thesis that the USA is, and will continue for a long time, the only superpower in the world.

the Soviet threat. The most significant result was the signing of the Treaty of Brussels in March 1948, in which Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands rehearsed the creation of the first political-military organization ever established in peacetime in Western Europe. The plan, however, contained several shortcomings, among them the fact that it did not directly consider the inevitable involvement of the USA (MILLER, 1998).

As early as 1947, the term *containment* would be introduced by George Kennan³ and would summarize the essence of the US stance towards the USSR throughout the Cold War, despite translating into different policies at various times throughout the period. Kennan understood that US interests were identified with maintaining a balance of forces in particularly important regions. According to the argument, only a few regions would have sufficient industrial and military importance for their eventual control to affect decisively the balance of power. After an initially generous and extensive elaboration, Kennan presented the five centers of vital industrial and military interest in the world: the USA, the USSR, the United Kingdom, Germany (together with the rest of central Europe) and Japan. of two of these centers by the same state could have devastating consequences for the possibilities of maintaining the balance of power. The USSR⁴, in addition to being one of those centers, had a natural interest and the ability to claim control of at least one more of them, and it is precisely at this point that it needed to be contained. An important corollary was that the focus of containment should therefore be Soviet expansionism, and not necessarily communism as an ideology. Kennan did not believe communism to be the driving force behind incentives for Soviet expansionism, but rather its justification (GADDIS, 1982).

Perhaps one of the most important conclusions reached within the fledgling organization established by the Treaty of Brussels in 1948 was that, without the political and military support of the United States, there would be little chance that their states would succeed in the face of a massive onslaught of the USSR towards the occupation of Western Europe. Despite a natural hesitation to assimilate the tragic reality, the United States would soon come to the same conclusion. The result was

³ This is one of the most influential articles of the time, entitled *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, which was signed by Kennan with a pseudonym - Mr. X - that became famous.

⁴ Note the clear influence of Halford Mackinder's geopolitical thinking on the consequences for the global balance of power of the control of the Eurasian heartland by a single state.

the beginning of negotiations that initially involved the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada and that put on the agenda the formation of a permanent military alliance. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was born by a treaty signed in April 1949, initially constituted by the 5 States belonging to the Treaty of Brussels (United Kingdom, France, Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland), added to the USA, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway and Portugal.

NATO's first expansion took place with the entry of Greece and Turkey⁵ in 1952. The Paris Agreements of 1954 solved the still uncertain situation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), also known as West Germany: it was recognized as a sovereign state. Thus, the American, British and French forces stationed in their territory lost their right of occupation and acquired a new status: as delegations invited by the FRG government to remain. And perhaps most importantly, the FRG became part of NATO (MILLER, 1998). Finally, Spain was integrated into NATO in the early 1980s, the last state to join the alliance until the end of the Cold War. The first years of NATO's existence were marked by efforts aimed fundamentally at improving its defensive potential⁶, strengthening its organizational structure and rearming the FRG.

It would be really surprising if the USSR passively watched all this political-military mobilization by the Western allies, and did nothing about it. The politically and militarily favorable position of USSR in Eastern Europe shortly after German surrender triggered the almost natural process of shedding its weight over the surrounding states. At first, a series of bilateral treaties were imposed by the USSR on them, the main considerations of which were common defense arrangements. The notion that the greater the Soviet control over the buffer zone that separated it from its Western opponents, the greater would be its

⁵ We point out that with Turkey's entry into NATO, the alliance came to have a member that actually divided borders with the USSR.

⁶ Regarding the size and composition of the forces, there was a clear need for improvement and mobilization. Naval and air forces were well below the ideal contingent after the significant reduction in the number of ships and aircraft in the postwar period. The ground forces had approximately 20 divisions, but were already involved to some extent in occupation activities, unsatisfactorily armed and equipped. In 1950, NATO committed itself to the adoption of a forward defense, which was aimed at containing a Soviet advance at the most easterly point possible, i.e., at the border between the two Germanys. It should also be noted the great influence that the Korean War (1950-1953) had on the American decision to further strengthen and militarize the alliance. The author is grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing attention to this point.

security and freedom of action to face the powerful alliance in formation clearly present. The decision by the USA and its allies to integrate the FRG into NATO and simultaneously promote its rearmament was the culmination of the process that led the USSR to think about its own military organization. In 1955, (the year following FRG's entry into NATO), the Warsaw Pact, which brought together the USSR, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania, was clearly present as a permanent military alliance⁷. Like NATO, the Pact provided for the establishment of an Integrated Command Structure (ICS) for its forces. However, the influence of the most important NATO member (USA) on its ICS has never come close to the USSR's almost absolute control over his military organization's ICS.

In 1966 France withdrew from NATO's ICS, and this decision is commonly attributed to two events: the defeat of the French garrison surrounded by Viet Minh communist forces in Dien Bien Phu, Indochina, in 1954-1955, through the refusal of the USA and the United Kingdom to carry out a support bombardment against the siege forces (France even suggested that nuclear artifacts be used in the operation); and the failure of the 1956 Suez crisis, this time alongside the United Kingdom. It is argued that these two events were added, naturally with the presence of other factors⁸, for France to rethink its defense needs. The conclusion was that it was necessary to seek greater self-sufficiency and independence, with emphasis on the development of its own nuclear program. Serious internal crises also affected the Pact throughout the Cold War period, the most significant being that of Hungary, in 1956, and that of Czechoslovakia, in 1968 (GADDIS, 1982).

The outlines of the bipolar Cold War order were reasonably outlined. However, if on the one hand bipolarity provides the benefit of greater certainty and stability in the identification by the great powers of its main rival (WALTZ, 1979; 1988), on the other hand there remains the difficult task of thinking about the doctrine that will inform the positioning before it and its actions. This is an aspect that has always been far from obvious and uncontroversial. On the US side, Kennan's initial

⁷ The signed Pact did not provide for the displacement of Soviet forces to non-Soviet alliance states. However, it was the subject of subsequent bilateral agreements. See Miller (1998).

⁸ The decade-long gap between the aforementioned international events and the French decision of 1966 indicates that domestic factors also played a role. The author is grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing attention to this point.

formulations about the containment process were only the beginning of the conversation, despite its great importance and influence. The following decades would witness a real revolution in American strategic thinking, the benefit of which was the evolution of the US posture and concrete policies, in the face of the need to contain the USSR. The rationale for this evolution reflects the essence of the Cold War.

THE THERMONUCLEAR REVOLUTION AND THE CREDIBILITY PROBLEM

The thermonuclear revolution, an expression that refers to the development and testing of the hydrogen bomb by the USA in the early 1950s, is considered a watershed in American strategic thinking. Neither the development nor the effective detonation of atomic bombs against Japan in 1945 were enough to bring about a revolution in the way the United States strategically thought about conducting a war in the future (TRACHTENBERG, 1989). The notions that informed the practice of “strategic bombing” (WARNER, 1943; MACISAAC, 1986), widespread before and during World War II, were still considered adequate even after the USSR developed its own atomic arsenal, in 1949. The development of thermonuclear bombs would dramatically change the situation. The energy released by these armaments was enormously greater than the maximum that could be obtained with atomic bombs, which presented the greatest potential for destruction until then⁹. The initial astonishment at the exponential increase in nuclear destructive capacity led Bernard Brodie, one of the greatest American strategists of the period, to suggest – and later withdraw the suggestion – about the obsolescence of the Clausewitzian definition of war as the continuation of politics by other means (CLAUSEWITZ, 1993). What would be the impacts of the new war reality on the US stance towards the USSR? How would they think of defending US interests in other regions in

⁹ The measurement of the amount of energy released by nuclear weapons is made in comparison to the detonation of the conventional explosive TNT. Thus, 1 kiloton (Kt) is equivalent to the energy released by 1,000 tons of TNT, and 1 Megaton (Mt) corresponds to 1 million tons of the same explosive. For comparison, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki corresponded, respectively, to 12 Kt and 22 Kt. As early as 1952, fission bombs had the capacity to release 0.5 MT of energy, and 1 Mt armaments were near to taking part of the US arsenals. In the 1960s, a US Air Force bomber was capable of carrying 6 B61 bombs, which totalized 3 Mt.

the face of the specter of a possible total war of annihilation, which the new types of weapons have come to allow?

The most immediate role that nuclear arsenals could take, both from the point of view of the USA and the USSR, was to deter a nuclear attack by the rival power. This raised the basic need to ensure the survival of a retaliatory capability (*second-strike capability*) in the face of a first attack suffered, so that the threat of retaliation was possible and deterrence could work. A great concern arose from the idea that the nuclear balance was more delicate than was believed and could be broken, not by a political motivation that guided the use of nuclear weapons, but by the risky relationship between vulnerability and preemption¹⁰ (WOHLSTETTER, 1958). The paradox was that not only was the total vulnerability of the US arsenals dangerous for encouraging an attack by the USSR, but also the vulnerability of the Soviet arsenals would generate the expectation that they could be attacked and destroyed. Thus, such vulnerabilities would encourage preemptive actions from both sides.

It would soon be understood that provoking the neutralization of the opponent's arsenals, through capabilities that seek their total destruction or by creating defensive systems that make their main targets (especially cities) invulnerable to an attack, would work to generate instability and encourage prevention, since neither alternative could be put into practice instantly. In the Kennedy administration, the notion of mutual assured destruction (MAD) would dominate the debate, advancing that the best way to protect the population itself is to make it vulnerable, as long as the other side does the same (TRACHTENBERG, 1989).

All of the previous discussion reveals a facet of the new reality: a total nuclear war between the United States and the USSR would be the worst possible outcome and both sides should take the referred steps to discourage it. However, it soon became clear that the logic of deterrence could not be dissociated from the possible use of nuclear arsenals, since the threat of use was itself the cornerstone of the entire process. It was also necessary to think about how and to what degree a nuclear attack

¹⁰ Preemption is understood as the act of taking the initiative in the the imminence of the other side taking it. The emphasis on imminence is justified by the differentiation between preemption and prevention. The latter also implies taking the initiative, but not in the imminence that the opponent takes it. In this case, it is expected that the passage of time will weigh favorably on the opponent's side (as in the case of a continuous process of military strengthening), so that it is more interesting to take the initiative and face it now than to do it in the future. See Reiter (1995).

should be carried out if deterrence failed (TRACHTENBERG, 1989). In other words, the concrete possibility that nuclear arsenals had to be used raised the need to think about how to use them.

The USA, under the presidency of Eisenhower and with Dulles in the position of Secretary of Defense, launched the doctrine of massive retaliation as a basis for the US stance towards the possibility of aggression by the USSR. Such a doctrine was consistent with a principle of asymmetric responses in which an attack from the USSR, however moderate, should be responded to with heavy nuclear retaliation¹¹. It should be noted that the doctrine naturally covered the alliance systems developed by the USA, extending to them, at least within the scope of declaratory policy, the proposal of deterrence posed by massive retaliation.

The stance adopted by the United States with the doctrine of massive retaliation did little to affect the way in which the dynamics of deterring a Soviet attack on American territory were put in place. Indeed, such a doctrine would not even be necessary for the USSR to understand that the use of nuclear weapons against the territory of the USA, as the latter had its own arsenals capable of surviving the attack, which would result in an overwhelming nuclear response. The great question surrounding the doctrine was: what would be its effects on the US's commitment to the defense of its overseas allies. In short, a highly inflexible doctrine that seemed to offer no answer but a total nuclear war with the USSR had deleterious effects on the credibility of the US commitment to its NATO allies. The central question was: being a massive US nuclear attack to the USSR something close to a virtual suicide, what would be the real chances that this would also happen if what were at stake was the survival of an ally and not your own?

According to French General Pierre Gallois, the 1950s witnessed the revolution in the nuclear field and in the technology of delivery of many weapons. In the case of USSR he emphasizes the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles and the advent of submarines launching Polaris missiles, together with other devices that could guarantee the

¹¹ Mearsheimer argumenta que a denominação “retaliação maciça” não faz jus aos reais propósitos da doutrina. O autor acredita que havia ampla evidência, especialmente por parte de oficiais do Comando Aéreo Estratégico da Força Aérea dos EUA (*Strategic Air Command*), de que se tinha em vista um ataque arrasador aos bombardeiros soviéticos quando estes estivessem na iminência de alçar vôo para iniciar uma operação de ataque. Portanto, para Mearsheimer, perdia-se a natureza retaliatória que informava a doutrina, sendo mais apropriado entendê-la como um “ataque maciço”. Ver Mearsheimer (2001).

invulnerability of at least a retaliatory portion of the nuclear arsenals. Such developments would have removed the last vestige of rationality that could be embedded in its use by the USA before being attacked.¹² The certainty that a considerable portion of its territory and population could be reduced to dust in a matter of hours would certainly be strong enough for the United States to hesitate, to say the least, in the face of an attack. Soviet nuclear power to one or more of its allies, let alone when it came to some minor incursion, limited and possibly involving only conventional forces.

Deeply influenced by the understanding developed earlier, the John F. Kennedy government, with the influential Robert S. McNamara in the Department of Defense, would propose the most important and decisive doctrinal review of the Cold War, delimiting its main outlines since then: the massive retaliation would be replaced by flexible response. At the heart of the new doctrine was the belief that the USSR had an advantage over the USA, in that it could have a flexible range of options to impose its interests. Therefore, flexibility was also necessary for the United States to deal more adequately with each of these options, opening up a range of possibilities between the extremes of inaction and total nuclear war, the only choices that massive retaliation seemed to offer. The flexible response doctrine was based on six very illustrative pillars of the flexibility sought: i) improvement of both nuclear capabilities¹³ and conventional means of force; ii) advancement and development of missile technology¹⁴; iii) strengthening military alliances¹⁵; iv) increasing the importance of non-military alternatives in the containment process¹⁶; v) more effective

¹² General Gallois was one of the main voices in favor of the Western European states maintaining independent nuclear arsenals with sufficient size and composition to influence deterrence dynamics. Thus, the general would also acidly oppose the American proposal to set up a multilateral nuclear force under NATO command deposited on surface ships (the initial proposal was that the forces be operated from submarines), to replace the independent arsenals that Europeans wanted. Such a force was never created.

¹³ The emphasis on a proportional and flexible response has never meant disregarding the role of nuclear arsenals.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the emphasis on improving missile technology continued even after the demystification, in the early 1960s, of the belief that the USSR had acquired a decisive advantage over the USA in this field.

¹⁵ In trying to resolve the crisis of confidence in the US commitment by its European allies, the US increased the amount of "tactical" nuclear weapons by 60%. The term "tactics" here is used, with a certain conceptual inconsistency, to differentiate between nuclear weapons with low destructive capacity and potential counter-force use on the battlefield from those, said to be "strategic", with great destructive capacity and aimed at deterring a countervalue attack of the opponent.

¹⁶ The need to further explore non-military alternatives arose from the interest in combating

administration of domestic resources involved in defense spending; and vi) expansion of negotiation efforts with the USSR (GADDIS, 1982).

The emphasis on increasing conventional means did not come from the widespread notion that NATO was at a profound disadvantage in relation to the Pact's forces from the point of view of the conventional balance sheet. Even during the Kennedy administration, this idea would be demystified. In fact, the Pact did have a significantly larger number of divisions than NATO, but the actual balance of forces was quite different from what these figures suggested. New methods of analysis showed that the Pact's divisions were one-third the size of NATO divisions, and when qualitative elements were added (such as training troops and command structures, quality of armaments and equipment, mobilization capacity, etc.) the balance it weighed even more on the side of the latter (GADDIS, 1982).

The increase in the conventional force structure was, in conclusion, a reorientation of the stance that the United States envisaged to provide for the defense of its allies. This fact, coupled with the disapproval of the US that its European allies had independent retaliatory nuclear arsenals, intensified some voices that understood that the total disengagement of the USA with respect to a possible nuclear attack by the USSR to Western Europe was launched. The aforementioned General Gallois spoke of the "nuclear disengagement" of the USA, by changing one doctrine that envisaged nuclear retaliation to one in which conventional means would have priority regarding the defense of Europe (GALLOIS, 1963). It was believed that the United States tried, in other words, to minimize the risks of being involved in a nuclear confrontation with the USSR, to the detriment of the security of its allies.

However, contrary to what at first sight might have seemed, the reorientation that flexible response placed came to reinforce the rationale that would solve the problem of the credibility of the US commitment.

the influence of the USSR in Third World countries (possible an initial step towards its political and military domination), especially after the USSR declared its support for possible "wars of national liberation".

ABANDONMENT OF THE INITIATIVE AND THE RISK MANIPULATION

The problem of the United States' commitment to the defense of its allies is keenly summarized by the following Schelling passage:

It hardly seems necessary to tell the Russians that we would fight them if they attacked us. However, we struggle to tell them that they would be fighting America if they or their satellites attack countries that are associated with us. Unfortunately, saying that does not make it true; and even if it's true, saying that doesn't always make it credible. We evidently do not want war and would fight one only if we were forced to do so. The problem is to demonstrate that we would had to be obliged to do so (Schelling, 1966, p. 35).

Schelling realized that a situation of *deterrence is necessarily a function of the commitment to act in a threatened way if the other party proceeds in the way to be avoided*. Effective deterrence, therefore, depends on the credibility of that commitment. What the United States faced in relation to the USSR was precisely a question of credibility, in the face of the virtual suicide that would mean nuclear retaliation in the face of an attack on one of its allies, be it conventional or nuclear. How can we expect any state to commit suicide in the name of the survival of another? And yet, as the previous passage suggests, even if the intention was really to commit suicide, it would still be necessary that USSR *believed* this for the deterrence to work.

The key to understanding the problem posed to the US commitment is exactly that, although they may say they would retaliate if the USSR tried to dominate Europe, the US would still have, if deterrence failed and the USSR really attacked, the option of choosing between involvement and inaction. In view of the dramatically sensitive situation that would arise, it would not be difficult to believe that the USA would choose the option that did not refer to its annihilation; and even if the USSR, despite all the rationality involved, mistakenly believed and the United States chose to retaliate, worse for both. From this logic, and in line with Schelling's reasoning, it appears that the problem of deterrence lay in the option of choosing what the United States would face in the face of a Soviet attack on one of its allies. In a highly counterintuitive way, what

at first sight might seem like a benefit – the possibility of choosing how to proceed in a reckless context – precisely was the factor that could produce the failure of deterrence.

Consequently, in order to achieve its political objectives, it was necessary for the USA to “project their intentions”, in Schelling’s words, and to put itself in a position where there was no doubt about what would be its reaction to an attack Soviet to its allies. In other words, the USA needed to get rid of the ability to choose in the face of the eventual failure of deterrence, paradoxically to avoid precisely that failure. According to Schelling:

The compromise process on which American overseas deterrence depends - and on which all confidence within the alliance depends - is a process of delivering and destroying options that we can expect to find very attractive in an emergency (Schelling, 1966, p. 44).

In military jargon, this refers to the act of burning bridges in the rear, in order to demonstrate to the opponent that retreating is not an option. In this case, there is the process that Schelling calls *abandoning the initiative, i.e.*, in which the decision to avoid or not what both sides may not want is completely left in the hands of the opponent. The ideal situation for the functioning of deterrence is created. Thus, it was from the need to “burn bridges” – so that the USA would leave the initiative exclusively in the hands of the USSR – is that the rationale for the historic US military presence in other regions was born. Once again, the way Schelling describes the process is irreplaceable:

How do we maneuver to a position where the other side has to make the decision? Words rarely do. To have told the Soviets in the late 1940s that if they attacked, we would be forced to defend Europe, would not have been entirely convincing. When the US government asked Congress for authorization to park Army divisions in Europe in times of peace, the argument was explicitly made that they would not be there to defend against a superior Soviet army but to leave the USSR without any doubt that the USA would automatically be involved in an eventual attack on Europe (Schelling, 1966, p. 47).

The presence of conventional NATO forces in central Europe (largely composed of US troops) indicated to the USSR that it would be up to it to decide whether or not to fight the US, as a Soviet advance would involve the automatic engagement of hundreds of thousands of Americans in the conflict¹⁷. The automation implied, of course, the end of the ability to choose, and it would work even if the United States eventually did not want to confront the forces of the Pact at that time. Such a situation is commonly referred to as trip-wire, which refers to the idea of a trap that automatically disarms, inflicting damage on those who disarmed it, regardless of the momentary intentions of those who set it up in the first place, creating the most conducive environment possible for operation of deterrence¹⁸. Thus, as Schelling's previous passage clarifies, the focus of presence was the certainty of involvement, and not the sheer need to defend territory against an offensive campaign by the USSR.

But what, exactly, would automatic US involvement in a conventional war in Europe imply? Could the situation created in fact not be interpreted, as General Gallois did, as a "nuclear disengagement" by the United States aimed at reducing its risks? If, in fact, General Gallois' view was correct and could be shared by the USSR, the whole effort of the US commitment would make little sense and the problem of credibility would not completely disappear. However, the factors that were posed did not imply the attempt by the USA to see its risks of involvement in a total nuclear war with the USSR minimized, as the General thought, but on the contrary they indicated the increase of credibility from the possibility of *manipulating these risks*. This process involves a type of exploitation of the threat of nuclear war neglected by the strategic thinking that preceded *flexible response*.

What the US involvement in a conventional war in Europe threatened was the generation of a serious crisis that, by definition, had the potential to get out of control of its perpetrators and lead to *unintended*

¹⁷ This process also worked for the forces that the US kept stationed in Japan and South Korea during the Cold War.

¹⁸ When the doctrine of massive retaliation was launched in the 1950s, it was expected to signal to the USSR that a trip-wire was placed on it, i.e., that an attack on the USA or an ally would be answered automatically with heavy nuclear retaliation. In view of the logic developed so far, it is clear that the doctrine did not impose a real trip-wire (hence its main source of incredibility). The idea of an effective nuclear trip-wire that implied automatic retaliation is well illustrated by the so-called Doom's Day Machine developed by the Soviets in the film *Doctor Strangelove* (1964), directed by Stanley Kubrick.

and initially unimaginable consequences¹⁹. The US threat of deliberate nuclear retaliation in the face of an attack on an ally did indeed have a credibility problem. However, cold and deliberate action was not the only possible source from which nuclear engagement could emerge. A crisis could lead to a sequence of events in which measures and countermeasures would be taken, in which actions of one side would determine the responses of the other and, in turn, determine new actions and responses. A crisis, therefore, was capable of creating a vicious circle of stimuli and responses whose results were unpredictable, bringing dangerous uncertainty to the agents' action calculations. It was not impossible, for example, that in a prolonged crisis at least one side would see a total nuclear war as inevitable or imminent, which could lead it to take the initiative even if it was to try to minimize the damage that the opponent could inflict on it.

It is from this logic that Schelling's classic view of the Cold War as a "war of nerves" takes place (SCHELLING, 1960; 1966). The competition took place, above all, in the field of risk absorption: given the real possibility of creating critical situations in which things could get out of control, the side capable of bearing more risks (risks, of course, in which both parties incurred) were more likely to see their political interests achieved. The United States did not need to threaten the deliberate and initial use of nuclear artifacts so that the possibility of their use was envisioned by the USSR. The United States could, in effect, threaten to create a critical situation in which the course of events could lead to a nuclear attack, even if that was not the intention at first. The permanent US military presence in the center of Europe guaranteed the *automatic* start of a serious crisis through the eventual attempt by the USSR to take over Western Europe. Trachtenberg summarizes the reasoning, saying that:

The threat value of nuclear weapons could thus be exploited even in a situation where, because of the prospect of retaliation, a deliberate attack on an enemy might be totally irrational (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 311).

¹⁹ Schelling defines crisis as a process in which there is a risk that the results will escape the control of the participants and, at the same time, it does not imply a deliberate decision linked to the ultimate consequences. Thus, what makes the situation critical is that the ultimate consequences may appear or not, depending on how their internal dynamics develop. Uncertainty is an essential element of the crisis concept and it is what allows its manipulation. See Schelling (1966).

From the previous lines it appears that the primary function of the conventional structure of forces permanently stationed in the center of Europe was to arm the trip-wire and affect the war of nerves, from the perspective of automatic US involvement in the conflict. This conclusion could suggest the realization that such a force structure would not need to meet purely military requirements, in the sense of being able to prevent a rapid and decisive victory for the USSR in an offensive campaign. This finding, however, would be in error.

The central point is that the role of conventional forces in affecting risk manipulation and war of nerves could not be dissociated from their purely military and defensive role. It was clear from the previous discussion that deterrence was a function of the USSR's belief in the possibility of a major crisis that could have unpredictable results. The fact is that a crisis of such dimensions should necessarily involve a long process, in which there was really a chance that its conduct would escape the control of the States. A "flash crisis" would hardly be enough, and the expectation of its ephemerality could undermine deterrence efforts. Thus, it is understood that in addition to ensuring automatic US involvement in a war against Pact forces, NATO's conventional structure should also be able to prevent the USSR from obtaining a quick and decisive victory in order to generate a crisis with the possible expected effects. The adequacy of NATO's force structure for this additional purpose depends on tactical, strategic and logistical considerations involved in conducting a conventional war in central Europe.

THE CONVENTIONAL BALANCE OF FORCES AND THE DYNAMICS OF A WAR AT THE CENTER OF EUROPE

A study of the conventional balance in central Europe necessarily involves the composition and deployment of NATO and Pact forces. In the case of NATO, two commands were responsible for the defense of Central Europe: the Northern Army Group (NORTHAG) and the Central Army Group (CENTAG). Both were commanded, respectively, by a British General and an American General. Eight units or bodies and a reserve division comprised the two commands along the nearly 800 km that covered the German internal border (between FRG and FRG/Czechoslovakia), forming

NATO's advanced line of defense. The distribution and composition of the bodies within the two commands took place as follows²⁰:

NORTHAG was composed of four bodies and a reserve division:

- The most northerly corps was formed by Dutch forces and had nine brigades (three armored and six armored infantry), of which only one and a reconnaissance battalion remained stationed in the FRG in times of peace;
- Below there was a corps composed of German forces, consisting of three *panzer divisions* (armored) and a *panzer granadier* division, each with three brigades;
- Then there was the British corps of forces, composed of two armored divisions, each with three armored brigades. This Corps could still count on an armored division stationed in the FRG (outside the advanced defense structure), with two brigades, and still with a third one stationed in the United Kingdom;
- The Belgian Corps, situated on the border between NORTHAG and CENTAG, was formed by a mechanized division, two brigades (one armored and one mechanized), a kind of reconnaissance brigade (Groupement Reconnaissance) and a mechanized division (with two brigades) mechanized) stationed in Belgium in times of peace;
- A US armored division, with three brigades, was on NORTHAG's reserve and would be deployed to the rear of the Dutch Corps in a war against Pact forces.

CENTAG was composed of 4 bodies:

- The most northerly Corps, below the Belgian Corps at NORTHAG, was formed by three German divisions, two *panzer* and one *panzer granadier*, totaling nine brigades;
- Below was an American Corps, formed by an armored division and a mechanized infantry division, added to an armored cavalry regiment;
- Then came another Corps composed of US forces, which, like the previous one, had an armored division, a mechanized infantry division and an armored cavalry regiment. Of the armored infantry division,

²⁰ See Miller (1998, part IV).

however, only one brigade was stationed in the FRG, the rest remained on American soil;

- The last Corps to the south was formed by German forces and was the only one that faced the border with Czechoslovakia exclusively (the former US Corps partially did so). Its composition was made from four divisions, being a *panzer*, a *panzer granadier*, a mountain and the last air heater, in a total of twelve brigades.

The disposition of the Pact's forces in East Germany did not reflect the same rigidity of the structure produced by NATO, imposed by the implemented defense system itself. Five Armies, equivalent to the Western Alliance Corps, were permanently stationed, forming the so-called Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG). Armies fell into two main categories, informed by the predominant composition of their forces: there were Tank Armies and Combined Arms Armies (MILLER, 1998). In addition to the GSFG, two groups complemented the Pact's forces in central Europe, the Northern Group of Forces and the Central Group of Forces. The composition of the Soviet armies will not be detailed, as done with respect to the NATO Corps, whose emphasis is justified by the purposes sought in this article.

A 1976 study revealed that NATO forces numbered 414,000 in 28 divisions, while the Pact had a contingent of 564,000 in 57 divisions. The force ratio in the general conventional balance was therefore 1.36: 1 in favor of the Pact²¹. Regarding armaments, a 2.5: 1 favorable ratio for the number of tanks and 2.8: 1 for the number of artillery pieces was calculated²². However, the simple comparison of the quantity of armaments leaves out the important qualitative factor²³. Thus, a composition of variables used by the US Department of Defense, known as Armored Division Equivalents

²¹ These numbers are taken from Fisher (1976) and cited in Mearsheimer (1982).

²² Numbers taken from Shishko (1981) and quoted in Mearsheimer (1982).

²³ According to Miller (1998), although NATO and Pact tanks have never met directly in central Europe, indirect clashes have taken place in peripheral wars on other continents. In such cases, the superiority of tanks developed by NATO countries over Soviet tanks could be attested.

(ADE)²⁴, calculated a significantly less advantage in favor of the Pact than the gross numbers seemed to indicate²⁵.

However, the ability of NATO forces to prevent the Pact from achieving a quick and decisive victory, undermining the possibilities of generating a serious and unpredictable crisis depended not only on the balance of conventional forces, but also on how military operations would be conducted.

As mentioned earlier, NATO forces were oriented towards an advanced defense structure²⁶, in which the defensive line formed by the eight Bodies along the border with the GDR would seek to contain an advance of the forces of the Pact at the beginning. The main objective was to stop the powerful Soviet advance as far east as possible, minimizing losses of territory. The possible strategy adopted by the USSR to overcome NATO's advanced defense is the key to analyzing the situation. According to Mearsheimer, the need to impose a quick and decisive victory on NATO forces gave the USSR a single viable option: to carry out a *blitzkrieg* (MEARSHEIMER, 1982).

The essence of the *blitzkrieg* consists in the concentration of heavy forces in one or more (few) points of the opponent's line of defense, in order to acquire a considerable tactical superiority, and to break it²⁷. This first phase is called a breakthrough operation, and the objective is to open one or more holes in the opponent's line. The next step concerns the exploitation of these holes, when the attacking forces must make a strategic penetration from the rear of the defender and seek control of their lines

²⁴ Essentially from the variables mobility, firepower and protection, the ADE aimed to measure the fighting power of the North American divisions and, by means of comparisons, to measure the fighting power of both the forces of the Pact and of allies of the USA.

²⁵ Studies and analyzes carried out on the subject of conventional balance in Europe, especially in the 1980s, focused on ground forces and consciously neglected the balance of air forces. In that sphere, however, there was evidence that superiority would be on NATO's side. In maritime terms, the central factor would be the ability of the USA to keep the lines of communication between North America and Europe open. The United States would probably not encounter any major difficulties in this regard.

²⁶ There was no shortage of critics who disputed the adequacy of the type of defense adopted by NATO in view of the objectives pursued. Various alternatives to advanced defense have been proposed, such as mobile defense and area defense. A good discussion of the adequacy of NATO's advanced defense against its alternatives is found in Mearsheimer (1981).

²⁷ The importance of heavy and armored forces in achieving the first phase of a *blitzkrieg* gave tank divisions the central role in the operation. The first manifestation of this was with the fantastic performance of the German panzer divisions in World War II, whose success in conducting the *blitzkrieg* led to the fall of France in an impressive 40 days. At this point, the emphasis given by the Soviet Armed Forces to their Tank Armies is quite suggestive.

of communication. As the defense forces must focus on strengthening their defensive line, after the breach has taken place, the offensive forces do not expect to encounter considerable resistance during their strategic penetration, providing them with a favorable context for attacking the defender's lines of communication, foreshadowing its annihilation²⁸.

In short, to avoid a swift and decisive victory for the Pact's forces, NATO had to be prepared to prevent its opponent from achieving a blitzkrieg. In other words, NATO should be able to impose a protracted, costly and painful war of attrition as in the First World War. The deterrent process, therefore, depended on this ability, or at least on the expectations of the USSR²⁹.

The dynamics involved in a blitzkrieg reveal, in the first place, that the overall balance of forces (i.e., of forces in the whole theater of operations) is less important than the balance at the specific points where the breach of the defensive line will be attempted. The main question, therefore, is whether the offensive forces would be able to acquire the necessary tactical superiority at the breaking points. Second, even if the Pact were able to successfully carry out the first step of the *blitzkrieg*, its forces would still have to be able to successfully achieve strategic penetration.

In general terms, the evidence indicated that NATO had a good chance of thwarting an eventual *blitzkrieg* attempt by the Pact, resulting in a prolonged and costly war of attrition. Initially, consider in brief the possibilities that the forces of the Pact could successfully carry out the rupture operation³⁰. First, the regions covered by the NORTHAG and

²⁸ In the case of NATO, there was a significant aggravation: its lines of communication would be extremely vulnerable if the Pact's forces were successful in the initial phase of a blitzkrieg's rupture. France's departure from NATO's ECI in 1966 redirected the route of communication lines from the Atlantic/France to the Baltic/northern FRG. The biggest problem, however, came from the very low depth of the FRG territory, which imposed lines of communication on a vertical axis in the shape of an 8, at a distance dangerously close to the advanced defense line (Frankfurt occupied the center of the 8 and was at a distance only 100 km from the border).

²⁹ Mearsheimer argues that there were several reasons why the USSR would fear a prolonged war of attrition against NATO, among them: i) the exorbitant costs involved; ii) the fact that the Soviet Army was not oriented to conduct this type of war; iii) the specter of war on two fronts, based on the Chinese threat in Asia; etc. See Mearsheimer (1982). Still, one must keep in mind the superiority in terms of population and mainly in economic terms on the part of NATO states, which would allow them to maintain the war efforts for a longer time. However, following the reasoning developed so far, it is sufficient to consider the deep risks involved in a war of attrition from the point of view of manipulating the risks of a nuclear war, which is considered the central element here.

³⁰ The various studies and analyzes on the possibilities of breaking NATO's line of defense

CENTAG Bodies had few points on which the Pact could concentrate its forces in an attempt to break NATO's defensive line³¹. This meant that NATO forces could take precautions to ensure that the Pact did not achieve the tactical superiority necessary for the disruption. In addition, this allowed an initial containment of the advance to be accompanied by the displacement of troops from neighboring Corps to strengthen the points under pressure³². The Pact would also face a natural problem related to the force/space ratio. The fact is that a conventional defensive structure and its combat dynamics allow a greater amount of force to be stationed in a given space than the requirements of an offensive operation and its own dynamics allow³³.

Regarding the realization of an effective strategic penetration after an eventual initial success in the rupture phase, the conditions did not seem to improve the situation of the Pact forces. Several problems would have a negative impact on the process: i) excessive weight of Soviet units³⁴; ii) lack of command flexibility³⁵; iii) lack of initiative (direct corollary to the previous point, intensifying its implications); iv) NATO's

from a Soviet blitzkrieg were deeply influenced by a "rule of thumb" called rule 3.1. A "rule of thumb" is one that finds eminently empirical basis, without deep theoretical support. Proponents of the rule 3.1 indicated, from the observation of a broad history of blitzkrieg and attempts of blitzkrieg, that the attacker must have a superiority of 3 to 1 or greater in the place of the attack to be able to break the defensive line of the opponent. Mearsheimer's assessments, in particular, are largely based on this rule. The author makes a strong defense of its adequacy in Mearsheimer (1989).

³¹ Considerations related to terrain types, with an emphasis on the possibility of moving heavy divisions and the existence of obstacles and the availability of NATO forces along the line of defense, among other factors, led to only 5 possible axes from which a blitzkrieg could be attempted.

³² NATO's advantages in its ability to mobilize and displace would weigh favorably in this process.

³³ It was estimated that a brigade would be sufficient to conduct a defense stretch of 7 to 15 km. The 30 brigades that comprised NORTHAG forces, for example, had to cover a 225 km front, allowing almost the maximum concentration of force indicated. The situation was not so favorable on the long front of the CENTAG forces, but it was still possible to obtain a reasonable defense within the observed limits.

³⁴ Despite the fact that heavy and armored forces are angular in the execution of a blitzkrieg, mobility is also an important factor, especially in the execution of strategic penetration. There should, therefore, be a balance between the weight and mobility of the units, and a large disproportion in favor of the weight seemed to diminish the effectiveness of Soviet forces when rapid movements and maneuvers were at stake.

³⁵ The command of the Soviet forces, traditionally recognized as too centralized and rigid, could not provide the necessary flexibility that the operation of a quick and decisive exploitation of the advantages would require, coming from success in the rupture phase. See Mearsheimer (1982).

reserve operational units, for even without being the focus of its defensive apparatus, it would have sufficient strength, intelligence and command to try to impose resistance to the Soviet advance and even seeking to close the blanks in the defense line³⁶; among others³⁷. In short, NATO's conventional force structure at the center of Europe seemed adequate not only to fulfill its primary role of ensuring automatic US involvement in a European contingency, setting up trip-wire, but also to generate a long and serious crisis, which would be enough to affect the manipulation of the risks of nuclear war³⁸.

CONCLUSIONS

All the elements discussed above were added to the production of a bipolar international order faced by two formidable blocks, with a truly global impact, but at the epicenter of the process of containing the Soviet advance in central Europe. On the one hand, the USSR's broadly favorable position in Eurasia, as a corollary of World War II, placed it as a potential hegemon, capable of politically and militarily dominating the region. This situation soon translated into the inadequacy of the external balancing posture that the USA adopted in the first half of the 20th century, committing itself to regional scales of power only in the imminence of domination by an especially powerful state (MEARSHEIMER, 2001).

In other words, the European political configuration in the post-World War II era demanded a reorientation of the USA's global defense posture, placing it directly and internally in the dynamics of the balance of power in that region. This reality was compounded and intensified by the thermonuclear revolution, which, concretely, endowed the two superpowers with destructive capacity to functionally annihilate each

³⁶ French divisions, even not automatically involved in the operation, would probably be a formidable aid in the face of a Soviet advance through the territory of the FRG. Indeed, there was a considerable French military presence in the territory of the FRG, close to the border with France, to guarantee the security of its State.

³⁷ Keep in mind that the framework developed on the possibilities of the Pact to successfully carry out the two phases in the implementation of a blitzkrieg was done with extreme brevity and economy, not reflecting the real complexity of the involved analyzes

³⁸ It should also be noted that the permanent US military presence in Japan and South Korea fulfilled the same function of setting up the *trip-wire* in the face of the possibility of an attack by the USSR (in the case of South Korea, the trip-wire was intended also to a possible advance of North Korea and China), but its position was simpler since the forces did not face directly a powerful conventional structure such as the one of the Pact in a permanent line.

other's societies. The complexity of the new context and the resulting credibility problem posed to the USA in defending the status quo in Eurasia provided the rationale for the most concrete and historically expressive element of the international Cold War order: the substantial permanent US military presence in Europe (and also in East Asia, although this presence was not at the heart of the discussion).

In conclusion, the analysis produced in this work necessarily points to the relevance of considering the continuity of the US military presence in other regions, even in the absence of its original reason for being, as a distinctive and defining element of contemporary international politics. Although there is no formidable opponent that has to be contained by the USA in the current international order³⁹, the US international force structure was maintained at the same levels after the reduction immediately following the dismantling of the USSR (today totaling approximately 100,000 troops in Europe and 100,000 in Asia in combat and support functions). Concomitantly, NATO has been expanding and redefining its roles, in a more assertive direction. All of this suggests that the peacemaking character of the American military presence continues to be present, as the logic previously discussed predicts, through the expectation of automatic involvement of the USA in any serious attempt to redefine the status quo in regions that are important to the interests of the USA.

Important results of contemporary international politics, such as the flourishing of the European Union (at least until a few years ago) and even the 2003 Iraq War, cannot be analyzed apart from this essential element of the current international order. In the case of Iraq, it is not insignificant that, of the most important regions to US interests, the Middle East was the one presenting the least possibilities of American interference with its political dynamics until 2003. That was precisely due to the absence of US military forces stationed there until then⁴⁰. In short, the North American trip-wire remains assembled in the main regions of the world, guaranteeing the automatic involvement of the United States in major regional conflicts - but mainly working to deter the outbreak of these conflicts⁴¹.

³⁹ See previous note 1. See also Layne (1993) for the main argument that, contrary to the expectations raised by Wohlforth, post-Cold War unipolarity tended to be provisional and unstable.

⁴⁰ This is one of the main conclusions of Kugler (1998), five years before the 2003 war.

⁴¹ For a different interpretation - that the US global security posture, during and after the Cold War, aimed at achieving global hegemony - see Layne (2005).

A CONSTRUÇÃO DO COMPROMISSO: A PRESENÇA MILITAR DOS EUA NA EUROPA DURANTE A GUERRA FRIA

RESUMO

O propósito do artigo é apresentar e discutir entendimentos teórico-conceituais que permitam, mediante uma reconstrução histórica, compreender a *rationale* da presença militar permanente dos Estados Unidos (EUA) na Europa Ocidental durante a Guerra Fria, no contexto amplo de contenção e dissuasão da União das Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas (URSS). Esta compreensão não é relevante apenas dos pontos de vista histórico e teórico, mas também para dar sentido à política internacional contemporânea e ao ordenamento que a produz, dada a manutenção da presença – embora reduzida – de forças convencionais dos EUA na região mesmo com o desaparecimento de sua *rationale* original. Em termos metodológicos, o argumento é construído com base em fontes secundárias, quando se trata da reconstrução histórica do período, e com base em hipóteses largamente dedutivas, quando se trata dos arcabouços teóricos que orientam a análise, o que é comum ao pensamento estratégico no campo nuclear.

Palavras-chave: Guerra Fria. Revolução Termonuclear. Balanço Convencional. Postura de Força. Bipolaridade.

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Recebido em: 27/05/2019

Aceito em: 15/01/2020